

Joseph's Son

Luke 4:21-30

In our society and in Jesus' time people looked at the son to see the father; and at the father to see the son. If the father was an upstanding pillar of the community – then the expectations are the sons and daughters will have those same characteristics. However, if the father has a questionable character – people look with suspicion on the actions and motives of the children. Last weekend I attended the memorial service of a woman who had attended one of Detroit's best technical high schools in the mid-1950s. She married and had a son. Although she was not able to attend college and achieve her dreams, she and her husband poured all their love, resources and energy into their son – so the family and community had great expectations of him – “yes, he is Joseph and Marilyn's son. We knew when he was young he would become a contributing member of our community.”

This is what we see in our text. Jesus had left home – decided not to go into the family business or become a carpenter like his father – but had gone to be baptized by John in the Jordan River – went into the wilderness for a time and come back, gathering an entourage of disciples as he went. Jesus, a son of the community, had achieved some notoriety in other places and word of this had reached his home village. With no Internet, smart phones, or even telegraph, it appears he had already done enough along the way for the hometown folks to have some expectations. One can just imagine the pride that fills their eyes when he began the reading.

Jesus captured the attention of all in the synagogue—their eyes were fixed on him. Empowered by the Spirit, he read words from the prophet

Isaiah that served as the mission statement for his ministry. He had come to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and the acceptable year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:14-20; cf. Isa. 61:12; 58:6). After taking his seat, he pronounced, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (v. 21).

Those in the synagogue of Nazareth were initially amazed and impressed by these grace-filled words of Jesus. They were already impressed with how he read Hebrew in a public and his commanding way. It was Saturday and the community had gathered to worship. Their amazement was reflected in the question: "Is not this Joseph's son?" This is Jesus, son of Joseph, born of such humble circumstances, now speaking with such authority. His initial acceptance and the amazement of the townspeople were wonderful. Wow!

Joseph's boy was about to tell them how to become healthy, wealthy and wise. I can image they were all ears. I know this because on Thursday I listened to an audio commercial on my computer – the salesperson claimed that three financial experts have written a book to tell all of us who are wise enough to purchase it, how to get thousands more dollars from Social Security in our lifetime. And...if I purchased the book from this website I would receive an extra book call the Extra or Missing Chapter to tell me how to get non-government money to live on and I would be set for the rest of my life. My money problems would be solved...no more need to play the lottery or visit the casinos ever again! Or, while I am confessing, I did sign up to get two (2) products in December that will miraculously make me look like I bathed in the fountain of youth. I have also thought about getting a subscription to those Internet brain game programs that are suppose to make me smarter. See, I am like the people in Jesus' day – wanting Joseph's boy

to make me healthy, wealthy and wise – or at least tell me that is what God has in store for me if I just do this or that or keep doing what I'm doing!

This was how things started – but not how they needed. Their relationship was quickly put to the test as Jesus appealed to three rather disconnected sayings that eventually stirred the crowd to anger and unrest. First, he appealed to a saying attested in both Jewish and Greek writings: "Doctor, cure yourself!" (v. 23). Its use in this context appears out of place since Jesus had not made any attempts to heal or identify any sicknesses. The saying may be a way of anticipating that Jesus should deal with his own shortcomings before attempting to speak of the shortcomings of others. Another way of looking at this is Jesus may have been saying he didn't come to give them physical healing – nor would he heal himself of what lie ahead of him – healing may happen as a by-product of his true mission. Jesus' second comment was, "Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum" (v. 23). They had heard great healings had taken place: Peter's mother-in-law, and lines of people, so many, there was standing room only at the healing meetings! Jesus responded with a familiar expression, "No prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown" (v. 24). Jesus then declared what was ultimately at stake in the encounter, that was, the truth (*aētheia*). And the truth was revealed in the ways in which unexpected outsiders figure prominently as models of faith in Israelite history.

Jesus recalled two examples that harken back to earlier prophets—Elijah and Elisha—who reached beyond the people of Israel to welcome those who were most representative of the marginalized "Gentiles." Elijah went to the unnamed poor widow at Zarephath in Sidon. In a drought-stricken, famine-ridden land of many widows, God designated but one, a nonbeliever, to

make known both God's presence and God's power. The widow was obedient and faithful to God, willing to give the last of what she had in order for her household to receive a blessing from God (1 Kgs. 17:1-16). She endured the severe famine in the land and did not allow the apparent lack of resources to interfere with her relationship with Elijah. In the life-giving healing of the widow's son, God far surpasses the miraculous, life-giving food provided the widow, her family, and Elijah, and thereby prompts the joyous exclamation of her belief.

Elisha healed the Syrian leper known as Naaman. The commander of the army of Syria, a "mighty man of valor," learned of Elisha from a young woman he had captured from Israel to serve his wife. With a cache of silver and gold, and preceded by a kingly letter for safe passage, he "stood at the door" (2 Kgs. 5:9 KJV) of Elisha's house only to be rebuffed by a messenger telling him to wash seven times in the Jordan. Angered, and then cajoled by his servants, Naaman relented, bathed, was healed of his leprosy, and was won over to God. As a leader in the Syrian army, he epitomized a tangible threat to Israelites.

Both of these examples represented the extreme "other" to those in the synagogue crowd, and they served to drive home the point that the good news Jesus proclaimed was intended for Jew and Gentile alike. Indeed there were many widows and lepers in Israel, yet Jesus stated that "none of them" (i.e., none of the hometown Israelites) received assistance from Elijah or Elisha. They could see that the message of Jesus was not simply a seal of approval, but rather a message that threatened to dismantle the status quo and the stereotypes that defined the religious and social boundaries of those in the synagogue. Their initial astonishment with the words of Jesus turned to anguish. The comfortable world of those in the synagogue was

challenged, as Jesus moved from declaring the acceptable year of the Lord's favor to calling judgment on those who were not willing to accept "the least of these".

This is God at work, as God has been at work across the millennia, as God is at work even now—unfolding new narratives with, through, and among people, who are often outsiders to the assumed faithful. The good news that God bore through Jesus was jarring news, infuriating news to the faithful temple goers who pushed him, rushed him out of the city to throw him headlong down the hillside. The good news was not what they were used to, not what they expected from the living God, who had come to break through their hardened and selfish ways.

In the midst of the global complexities of this era, this century, the church faces the daunting possibility—indeed, the reality—that God is unfolding a new narrative through "outsiders," of people on the edge who come to God and bear witness to God through God's actions in foreign places, and occasionally in temple and church settings. Deserts. Drought-wracked lands. Famine. Struggling widows. Flint water crisis. Children with learning challenges. People who are hungry. Those imprisoned. Dying children. Disbelieving commanders. Servants. Isaiah. Elijah. Elisha. Jesus.

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The crowd, in their anger, drove Jesus out of town and even desired to hurl him off a cliff (v. 29). If and when we are real about proclaiming God's good news and therefore making people feel uncomfortable there will be people who want to silence us also...The fulfillment of Scripture is challenging and frightening to those who are incapable of including and identifying with marginalized outsiders. Yet, the fulfillment of Scripture is also liberating and healing to those who are able to keep their eyes fixed on

Jesus and model his example of engaging the "other" and moving beyond prescribed roles and expectations. **Gay L. Byron**

Whose sons and daughters will we be? Will we proclaim God's words with boldness, and do our part to bring justice and righteousness or we will be members of the hometown mob, fighting against God's inclusion and justice for our world. Our actions will tell whose children we are!

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